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Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities

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Jonathan Hearn (2016) 'The impact of *Imagined Communities* on sociology' (pp. 633-637), a contribution to 'Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*: a symposium' by John Breuilly, et al., in *Nations and Nationalism* 22(4): 256-659.

The first point this exercise brought home to me was that I don't normally think about the influence of major figures like Anderson in disciplinary terms. I think of him influencing a loosely defined cross-disciplinary field called nationalism studies (leaving aside his area studies impact). But once posed, it's an interesting question. The second point is that 'influence' or 'impact' is an elusive thing—it depends on how you define it. If it means appearing somehow in the works of others, the ripples of *Imagined Communities* have travelled far and wide. If it means penetrating into the very conception of nationalism, as widely expressed, the evidence is more equivocal. Which leads to my third opening point, which is a question. Did Anderson have a theory, or was it a collection of conceptual touchstones, brought together at a critical moment, in a beguiling form? I think this comes closer to the mark.

A quick informal survey of some major sociological outlets since 1983, *Annual Reviews of Sociology*, *American Journal of Sociology*, *American Sociological Review*, *British Journal of Sociology*, and *Sociology*, bears on my second point. Across these journals, although the term appears hundreds of times in the full texts and references, it only occurs in three article titles. And it is being stretched beyond its national remit, for instance 'schools as imagined communities', and 'imagined global community'. My sense is that in the wider field of sociology, the image of imagined communities has been as popular for its transposability as for its applicability to nationalism. It is standard in discussions of Anderson's key idea

to note his acknowledgment that all communities are 'imagined' to some degree (1991: 6). But sociologists seem to have made the most of this fact.

Limiting ourselves to those who are both sociologists (for the most part) and addressing nationalism, we can make a rough and ready distinction between three types of contexts in which *Imagined Communities* appears: historical comparativist treatments that offer long-term accounts of nationalism; surveys of major works in the field of nationalism studies; and exercises in theory building,

1. Historical comparativism

Imagined Communities is itself a loose-jointed work of historical comparativism. It offers an account of what kind of social phenomenon nationalism is, how it arose, and how it spread around the globe. As suggested above, it does not so much present and test a theory, as lay out a collection of striking, and, at least when first formulated, often counter-intuitive conceptualisations with which to get a handle on this phenomenon. Nations are 'imagined communities', real in their fictiveness. They crystallise at a particular historical moment, through the mechanism of 'print-capitalism'. People in a particular social position, 'creole pioneers', are the privileged articulators and carriers of the new worldview. Once formulated in the Americas, this new worldview morphs and adapts to multiple new contexts. And it is a 'worldview' entailing not just the imagining of community, but a reimagining of spatial and temporal relationships around the world, as abstract bearers of repeated forms of nation-ness. *Imagined*

Communities is a 'grand' narrative of this historical process, suspended between these striking conceptual formulations.

Given the historical comparative nature of the original argument, it is striking that in this field of sociology Anderson's influence seems modest and piecemeal. An unsystematic survey helps illustrate my point.

Throughout his four volumes of *Sources of Social Power*, Michael Mann is more likely to mention brother Perry than Benedict, only citing a less known *New Left Review* article on democracy in the Philippines (Anderson 1988) in volume three (2012). In *The Dark Side of Democracy* (2005) he briefly connects the imagined communities concept to his own conception of 'ideological power'. The place where he most fully engages Anderson is in his chapter on 'the emergence of modern European nationalism' (1992), where he draws on Anderson's print-capitalism thesis to amend Gellner's argument about the role of industrialisation in the formation of nationalism, suggesting that an earlier florescence of 'discursive literacy' in the context of commercial-agrarian states was instead the crucial factor.

Indeed, the print-capitalism thesis seems to be the main thing that more historically oriented sociologists have picked up on from Anderson. Josep LLobera's *The God of Modernity* (1994) briefly mentions 'imagined communities', but pays more attention to 'print-capitalism' as a peculiar thesis about the uneven development of capitalism. More recently, in his historical overview of *States and Power* (2010) Richard Lachmann also touches on the 'print-

capitalism' concept as crucial for the formation of modern citizenries. Apart from a footnote (2000: 188-9) where he takes issue with Anderson's notion of the reason why people are willing to die for the nation, which clashes with his own more rational choice perspective, Michael Hechter also mostly invokes ideas of communication and print capitalism in connection to Anderson in his *Containing Nationalism*. This prominence of print-capitalism is perhaps not surprising, given that among Anderson's set of 'touchstones', this is the one that is most like a causal mechanism, designed to explain historical change. I think the general narrative of replication and spread from a European or Euro-American core is so widely accepted that it is not likely to be attributed specifically to Anderson.

A few other historically oriented sociologists are also notable for their sparse reference to Anderson's ideas. Siniša Malešević mentions several key ideas from *Imagined Communities* in passing in *Nation-States and Nationalisms* (2013), but not to deploy them in any systematic way. In three major books (1992, 1996, 2004) Rogers Brubaker never seems to discuss Anderson or *Imagined Communities*. Liah Greenfeld, in a footnote in the Introduction to *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (1992: 496-7), castigates Anderson as offering an example of a 'materialist' approach, to which her highly idealist reading of Max Weber is theoretically opposed.

So, it is not possible to say that Anderson generated an influential paradigm for describing and analysing the historical emergence of nationalism. At most it seems appropriate to say that one of his key concepts, print-capitalism, has been

broadly taken up as nicely encoding an important and consequential material and cultural development, bearing on the emergence of nationalism.

2. Surveys of major works

Obviously there is something paradoxical about taking books that survey the field as evidence of the influence of *Imagined Communities*, because its presence in such books supposedly acknowledges its influence, rather than being instances of the same. There is an element of self-fulfilling prophecy at this point. At any rate, many of the most extended treatments of Anderson's ideas are found in such books. Again, a few examples from sociologists help illustrate.

The very idea of nations as 'imagined communities' provides an obvious point of departure for Craig Calhoun's 'discursive' conception of nationalism, presented in *Nationalism* (1997). Here, in ways I'm not sure he would have welcomed, Anderson tends to get aligned with Foucault, in a conception of nationalism as discursive form of thought and practice. This form has a specific history, but is rather detached from a notion of a general causal relationship between the material and the ideational, that I think was basic to Anderson's rather flexible relationship with Marx. This is one of the interesting points about Anderson, the way *Imagined Communities* blithely stood on a cusp between modernist and more postmodernist ways of thinking. In the last chapter Calhoun turns to Anderson's ideas of creole pioneers and the modular spread of nationalism, but again with the accent on nationalism as a discursive form, which leads into Partha Chatterjee's (1996) well known critique of this part of Anderson's thesis.

David McCrone's *The Sociology of Nationalism* (1998) raises Anderson's concept of imagined communities at the outset as a good starting definition, and especially to contrast it, as Anderson did himself, with Gellner's rather more instrumentalist sounding 'invention' of nations. He also finds Anderson's thoughts on the construction of space and time in the chapter on 'census, map and museum', added to the second edition, helpful for grappling with arguments about the invention of the nation. In chapter six he emphasises the way Anderson's creole pioneers hypothesis, and notion of nationalism as a uniquely modular political form provided a corrective alternative to the dominant neo-marxist world systems theories in which nationalism was largely epiphenomenal to the dynamics of evolving global capitalism and its divisions of labour. Throughout this book Anderson's ideas provide counter arguments to those who would minimise the importance of nationalism, because it is seen more as an effect of other more fundamental causes. However imagined, Anderson's nations, and world of nations, are causal processes in their own right, which cannot be easily reduced to others.

Philip Spencer and Howard Wollman's *Nationalism: A Critical Introduction* (2002) provides an overview of Anderson's ideas (pp. 37-40) and draws especially on him in their discussion of the role of culture in politics. True to their title however, they express reservations about Anderson's admitted sympathies for nationalism, and suggest that an analysis of nationalism must also be a critique of nationalism. For my own part, where I can speak more reflectively, when I wrote *Rethinking Nationalism* (2006) I was aware that

Anderson could not be ignored in this context, even though he doesn't figure prominently in my other work on nationalism. There I emphasised the fact that Anderson seems to deploy a very complex notion of culture, not the usual bundle of symbols and meaning attached to particular societies, but something more like a worldview, which has both highly particularistic and highly general manifestations. But I think of Anderson more as a provocative foil for reflections on nationalism, than as a progenitor of a theory, or a concise concept of the nation.

3. Theory building

What about Anderson's impact on more general social theory building in relation to nationalism? Anthony Giddens' *The Nation-State and Violence* (1985) was perhaps too early to be affected by the first 1983 edition of *Imagined Communities*, of which it didn't take any notice. But it is worth noting that modern modes of communication were quite central to Giddens' conception of the administrative power of the nation-state. This suggests to me that reconsiderations of the role of communication in nation building were generally 'in the air' at that time, but also that Giddens' rethinking of historical materialism, despite the profound difference of analytic style, was akin to Anderson's more humanistic, Walter Benjamin-influenced reconfiguration of Marxist ideas.

Paul James, though perhaps only a quasi-sociologist, is worth mentioning because in *Nation Formation: Towards a Theory of Abstract Community* (1996)

he uses Anderson's imagined communities concept as a point of departure for developing his own more heavily theorised notion of nations as a modern form of 'abstract community'. James is looking for an analysis of nationalism, and of abstraction, that avoids idealist-materialist dualisms, in which the abstraction of the nation is nonetheless a very concrete process. For him Anderson's version of 'imagined' inadvertently leans towards idealism and subjectivity, despite the attention to material conditions such as print-capitalism. So James's work is partly an effort to correct that bias.

One of the most recent major theory building exercises in this area is Andreas Wimmer's *Ethnic Boundary Making: Institutions, Power, Networks* (2013), a book with a remit much wider than just nations. Much like Rogers Brubaker's work, there is a call to question naturalised ethnic categories, and redirect analytic attention onto processes of boundary making. For present purposes, it is interesting to note that the term 'imagined communities' is mentioned three times in a long book, but only the first time in connection with Anderson. Thereafter it occurs as a commonly recognised term of art. Perhaps this is the tail end of influence.

To conclude, we should remember that influence itself is an historical process, with a logic and an arc. Reviewing various texts, I am struck by the way that when it first came out, and still in the revised 1991 edition with the additional chapters, *Imagined Communities* was providing a fresh counterpoint and alternative to more orthodox Marxian and liberal conceptions of nationalism, as either false consciousness or ethnic regression. It's now more like a grand old

Coupe de Ville, standing alone in a field, admired for its beautiful design, and routinely raided for its parts, its disruption of earlier orthodoxies slowly fading from memory.

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